The Internet We Want

Abstract

This paper synthesizes messages from the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), based on the outcomes of previous annual meetings, intersessional work and input from the IGF community. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the key digital policy issues and governance challenges, mirroring the concerns addressed by seminal UN processes such as the annual considerations of the progress made on the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the WSIS+20 review and the Global Digital Compact (GDC). It sets out the desired characteristics of the Internet, ensuring that it remains a powerful tool for sustainable social, economic and environmental development and human empowerment.

The IGF Leadership Panel calls for unified action among governments, private sector, civil society, and technical and academic communities to achieve these goals. The IGF's unique convening power and multistakeholder model are crucial to foster candid discussions, incentivize collaboration and forge shared solutions for realizing a whole, open, universal, inclusive, free-flowing, trustworthy, safe, secure, and rights-respecting Internet for social development and prosperity.

This paper aims to serve as a framework for the IGF to keep track of discussions and progress made on these topics as it continues its mandate, including at its annual meetings, as well as across its intersessional work and network of national, regional and youth initiatives. This framework can also serve as a base to keep track of the good practices and achievements of the broader IGF community.

Introduction

In today's digital societies, Internet governance is critical for economic, social, cultural and environmental development. Internet governance is a crucial enabler of sustainable development, ensuring that the Internet is used in a responsible and inclusive manner, including equitable participation in the digital economy, and can contribute to promoting freedom of expression, access to information, communication, and innovation. The importance of this agenda cannot be understated in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic recovery, supply chain shocks, and unfolding geopolitical tensions, especially as economies worldwide are working towards a sustainable economic rebuild.

Human rights apply online as they do offline. The vision for a resilient Internet can only be achieved if premised on the principles of the UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Internet and other digital technologies are vital components of a sustainable future. Leaders across all stakeholder groups globally must come together and collaborate in a cohesive and inclusive manner to ensure that their actions align with existing commitments to:

- promote a human-centric Internet that ensures respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law and protects against harmful behaviours and practices;

- expand connectivity and guarantee meaningful and affordable access for everyone, everywhere;

- preserve an open, free, globally connected, interoperable, unfragmented, and stable Internet;

- unlock the value of data for development and enable data free flow with trust, while ensuring data protection and privacy, to support a truly global digital   s;

- foster a safe and secure online environment, in particular by increasing efforts to strengthen cybersecurity and to support, protect and empower vulnerable and marginalized groups,;

- facilitate collaboration for the development of new and emerging technologies that pursue the public interest in a trusted way while continuing to enable innovation and ensure human rights safeguards are preserved;

- adopt environmentally-friendly practices, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), consistent with reducing greenhouse gas emissions, e-waste, protecting biodiversity and ensuring the responsible and sustainable use of natural resources when utilising the Internet and digital technologies;

- acknowledge, support and encourage the contribution of younger generations who play a key role in the global efforts to achieve sustainability and

- uphold and promote the multistakeholder approach in the governance of the Internet.

In line with these commitments, the IGF Leadership Panel encourages all governments, private sector, civil society and technical and academic communities to come together to share this vision, define goals and targets to achieve the Internet we – as a global society – would want, and promote the necessary coordinated and effective actions at local, regional and international levels to realise this common vision. Fostering meaningful collaboration under the IGF auspices is crucial for driving shared ideas that lead to compatible and harmonized regulatory and policy approaches. This will ensure that national concerns and priorities are met, without compromising the open nature of the Internet.

We firmly believe in the multistakeholder model and the unique convening power of the Internet Governance Forum to achieve this vision and offer the following characteristics as a starting point for discussions.

The IGF Leadership Panel believes that the Internet We Want is:

1. Whole and open;

2. Universal and inclusive;

3. Free-flowing and trustworthy;

4. Safe and secure; and

5. Rights-respecting.

When setting policies based on these characteristics, decision-makers should keep in mind that the Internet relies on a layered governance model, where each layer represents the various uses of the Internet and the services it offers. Challenges need to be addressed in relation to the layer closest to them, understanding that many are not solely Internet-related or rely on Internet-based solutions, but are part of broader societal issues that require a holistic policy approach.

1. Whole and open

A whole, open, free, globally connected, decentralised, interoperable and reliable Internet is vital for sustainable development, the functioning of digital societies and economies, for supporting business operations worldwide, and a prerequisite to the effective functioning of public services such as education, disaster prevention, health care or various governmental services. When properly harnessed, information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital technologies are formidable engines of innovation, competitiveness development, sustainable and inclusive digital transformation, and instruments of social, cultural, and economic empowerment for all.

This unique potential can only be fully exploited if the fundamental nature of the Internet as an open, whole, interconnected, and interoperable network of networks is preserved. The same is expressed in the commitments of the GDC to address risks of fragmentation of the Internet and refrain from Internet shutdowns.

However, at present, there is a heightened risk that policy or business decisions might fragment the Internet into siloed parts. The potential fragmentation at either the technical, content or governance layers, threatens the open, whole, interconnected, and interoperable nature of the Internet, and its associated benefits to social and economic development, while also harming human rights, including the right to privacy, freedom of expression and access to information, amongst others.

Avoiding fragmentation of the Internet requires international cooperation and a coherent governance structure, grounded, first and foremost, in existing multistakeholder mechanisms like the IGF. It entails advocating for policy frameworks that prevent discrimination in data transmission and equal access to online content, advancing interoperability standards, as well as combating measures like content blocking and restrictions on data flows which lead to digital fragmentation. Internet shutdowns, vague prohibitions of online content, and criminalization of legitimate forms of expression initiated by governments are particularly concerning threats to the open and free nature of the Internet.

We call on all stakeholders to set goals to ensure that the Internet is whole, open, free, globally connected, decentralised, interoperable, stable, unfragmented and human rights-based in support of social well-being and prosperity. A commitment not to politicise the core technical elements of the Internet, and to refrain from the imposition of bans or restrictions which may lead to shutdowns or interference with free expression, works toward achieving this aim.

2. Universal and inclusive

This characteristic corresponds to Objective 1 of the GDC to "Close all digital divides and accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals", and to Objective 2 of the GDC to "expand inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy for all".

Since its inception, the Internet has evolved from an information exchange network to the platform for sustainable social and economic development we recognise it to be today. An open, stable, and trusted Internet is vital for the effective functioning of a diverse array of services, as varied as agriculture, energy, healthcare, manufacturing, mobility or education, continuously reimagining the way people interact with their peers, businesses, and governments. However, despite the enormous progress in expanding connectivity in recent years, 2.7 billion people remain unconnected.

Connecting the unconnected and reconnecting the disconnected is not just about infrastructure and access to the Internet. Meaningful connectivity also requires focus on bridging the barriers to adoption, including creating and maintaining an enabling environment in which locally relevant content, in local languages and scripts is created, and that caters to expanding and enriching the internet ecosystem by increasing its diversity in various aspects, such as content, users, platforms, and infrastructure. This entails ensuring affordable internet access by way of strong public-private partnerships, particularly for low-income populations and rural regions, and should aim to overcome barriers to access faced by women and marginalized communities, including for those with disabilities. Related policies and tools should be designed to identify and address skills gaps, including investing in educational institutions and providing easily accessible and localised training aimed at enhancing digital literacy, particularly for developing countries. The enduring digital divides in access, application, and skills among and within countries emphasise the need for universal, affordable, and meaningful connectivity in order to reach the development potential of the Internet, ICTs, and digital technologies. Meaningful connectivity should also be secure, resilient and cost-effective.

In pursuit of these goals and of a human-centric, sustainable digitalization, all stakeholders must improve their understanding of how ICTs work in practice, including knowledge of the ICT ecosystem, the roles of the various stakeholders and relevant policy issues. Governments should work together with the international community, the private sector and all relevant stakeholders, to improve infrastructure and diversify access to the Internet. All stakeholders should strive to protect user data and privacy, and to take into account potential risks of emerging technologies.

Frameworks that enable Internet connectivity should be based on light-touch ICT policy and regulations, encourage universal access through competition and the entry of new players into the ICT ecosystem to foster the emergence of innovative products, services, and business models. Policy and regulatory mechanisms should consider the value of the entire communications and digital services ecosystem and involve engagement with all stakeholders, with a view to identify threats to an open internet. They should be non-discriminatory, technology-neutral, and supportive of innovative business models and the development of a wide range of technologies, standards, and system architectures, which may be interoperable . Successful efforts to deliver universal meaningful connectivity need to balance the needs of all stakeholders, should be grounded in evidence and data, should seek global harmonisation in terms of interoperability and standards, should be supported by multistakeholder collaboration

and ongoing dialogue, should enable the effective management of spectrum between all stakeholders (preserving the free-to-air services for emergency communication), and must facilitate investment across the entire digital value chain.

We call on all stakeholders to set goals to move towards universal meaningful connectivity for everyone, everywhere, to encourage the uptake of new technologies at need, and to address skills gaps.

3. Free-flowing and trustworthy

Cross-border data flows underpin many aspects of modern life, holding immense potential in accelerating the attainment of the SDGs. They enable the global digital economy — cloud services, remote work, workplace collaboration, management of human resources, customer relationships and supply chains. They also underpin distance learning, telemedicine, the fight against cybercrime and child abuse online, fraud monitoring and prevention, investigation of counterfeit products, and a broad range of other activities. The processing and transfer of both personal and non-personal data are integral to many of these exchanges, making trust a vital element for resilient and sustainable economic growth and recovery.

The vital role of data and cross-border data flows is also recognised under Objective 4 of the GDC to "advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches". However, there is an increasing lack of trust, or confidence, due to concerns that policy objectives—such as privacy, national security, consumer and human rights protection, access to data or even industrial competitiveness—would be compromised when data moves abroad. This lack of trust serves as the rationale for the adoption of an increasing number of data localisation and sovereignty measures, leading to fragmented national approaches to data governance and a growing number of restrictions that prohibit or considerably encumber cross-border data flows. Failure to address this lack of trust and to find an appropriate trust model risks impeding cross-border data flows, thereby limiting economies of scale and scope, driving inefficient, unsustainable investment, and restricting innovation. In this context, the Internet should be both user-friendly and trustworthy. However, as noted above, given its layered architecture, stakeholders should refrain from influencing the technical protocols safeguarding the confidentiality of digital communications. Any tampering with these protocols could hinder the free flow of information.

International collaboration across governments and the multistakeholder community is paramount to shaping human-centric policies that foster trust – built on privacy, security, and the protection of consumers and intellectual property rights –, promote the wide-spread adoption of digital technologies that drive development, and enable the global movement of data that supports them.

The IGF provides a space for such collaboration and sharing of ideas to establish shared norms and compatible policy approaches, ensuring consistency, interoperability and efficacy across borders. Cooperation among different stakeholders is crucial, not only for developing such interoperable policy frameworks that facilitate cross-border data flows but also to ensure that these security principles do not inadvertently limit the global, open nature of the Internet. Policymakers must prioritize the protection of personal and industrial data while promoting the

global movement of data for societal benefit. They should work to ensure that data privacy and protection laws are comprehensive and stay up-to-date, and are implemented through a risk-based approach. Implementation should be carried out in a manner that is transparent, non-discriminatory and in line with the principles of necessity and proportionality.

To build trust, governments must commit to establishing robust protections for individuals' rights; particularly the right to privacy . This commitment necessitates interoperable and contemporary enforcement mechanisms, such as end-to-end encryption, to ensure effective data protection. Collaboration between governments, businesses, and multilateral organizations is vital for advocating for interoperable policy frameworks that facilitate cross-border data flows while maintaining high privacy standards.

By centring data privacy and people's rights in policymaking, promoting international collaboration, supporting the multistakeholder approach, and embracing privacy-enhancing techniques, we can foster a digital ecosystem that respects individuals' privacy and promotes trust in the global data economy.

We call on all stakeholders to set goals to unlock the value of data flows for sustainable development of all, and enshrine trustworthiness as the prerequisite for data sharing regimes, built around users both on and off the Internet, without limiting its open and global nature, and founded on the protection of data, IP rights and respect for human rights..

4. Safe and secure

Cyberspace is an intrinsic part of every country's development, creating enormous opportunities and enabling economic and societal growth. At the same time, the indispensable nature of cyberspace in day-to-day human activities also generates growing vulnerabilities. The same concern is recognized and discussed under Objective 3 of the GDC to "foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promote human rights".

Rapid digitalisation is testing the resilience of cyber infrastructures. The escalating vulnerabilities resulting from disparate states of cyber hygiene hinder the effectiveness of countermeasures against cyber threats, threatening to thwart the potential economic impact of ICT and digital technologies.

The borderless nature of the Internet and the associated digital economy, the increased cyber-physical interdependency of IoT, disinformation and constantly evolving patterns of cybercrime make up a complex legal and operational landscape for cybersecurity and safety. Considering this, the UN Charter as well as international humanitarian and human rights law apply in cyberspace and must underpin all cybersecurity and safety practices. Furthermore, data protection safeguards play an important role in enabling effective cybersecurity.

A collective, collaborative multistakeholder approach is required to find meaningful ways and effective solutions to mitigate local, cross-border and global cybersecurity concerns. Complex cybersecurity concepts need to be translated into simple concepts and practices, making knowledge about cybersecurity more accessible and allowing for security implemented by default in applications and connected devices.

To empower and protect societies, companies and the public sector from increased cybersecurity risks, the international multistakeholder community should explore practical ways to mainstream cybersecurity capacity building (CCB) into broader digital development efforts, including by mainstreaming cyber resilience across international development programming. These efforts must be inclusive and build on the perspectives and needs from all stakeholders, especially the most vulnerable and those from the Global Majority, including local small and medium-sized enterprises   . This is also essential for building resilient societies and promoting a whole-of-society approach to dealing with threats emanating from cyberspace, especially during election times.

We call on all stakeholders to set goals to establish and implement robust frameworks for high levels of cybersecurity, and strong recommendations for legal structures, practices, and cross-border cooperation to combat cybercrime.

We call on all stakeholders to commit to supporting the effective implementation of the acquis of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, and of international law which underpins the acquis of international peace and security in cyberspace.

5. Rights-respecting

Human rights apply equally online and offline. In accordance with international human rights law, governments are responsible for ensuring that human rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled while businesses and digital service providers are obliged to comply with all applicable laws and to respect human rights.

Human rights and sustainable development mutually reinforce one another – human rights are enablers of sustainable development while the 20230 Agenda can only be achieved through the effective realization of all human rights. These include economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights, in accordance with the principles recognised by the international community on the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelation of all human rights.

Human rights are fundamental to an Internet that serves humanity and the greater good. A human rights-based approach to Internet governance is required to realize the full benefits of the Internet for all while avoiding its risks

To that end, governments must refrain from Internet shutdowns. Any restriction of access to the Internet must be lawful, legitimate, necessary, proportional, and non-discriminatory.

Standards development organizations should introduce processes to ensure due consideration of human rights in their work, including by inviting experts from all stakeholder communities to participate in their discussions, with the aim to deliver human rights-compliant standards.

Human rights and environmental sustainability are intrinsically connected and both should be at the core of Internet governance. As we are striving to connect the next billion, human rights and environmental sustainability must be fully considered and embedded in the rules, policies, standards and practices that coordinate and shape the Internet. A human-centric digital transition that is diverse, inclusive, democratic, *and sustainable* is needed to ensure that Internet-connected technologies cause no harm to people and the environment.

We call on all stakeholders to set goals to ensure a human rights-based approach to Internet governance and to promote human rights in the digital space. This involves promoting transparency and accountability and protecting user privacy and data security, as well as implementing robust safeguards against misuse and exploitation, including measures aimed at reducing online harassment. The use of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies should be ethical and responsible, mitigating potential risks to human rights.

Multistakeholder consultations that include perspectives from all stakeholders, especially developing country stakeholders from civil society, the local private sector, independent media and individuals belonging to vulnerable or marginalized groups, are essential in achieving a rights-respecting digital space.

Stakeholders should consider how the whole of the digital governance system can better integrate human rights-based approaches and come to a common understanding of how rights frameworks can best be included and fully implemented online.

If we are to achieve the Internet we want, we have significant multistakeholder work ahead of us, including collaboration with existing and ongoing initiatives*.

*Initiatives like the IGF can be supported in various ways. Active support to IGF and the digital governance vision put forward here can be provided with financial contributions to the IGF Trust Fund: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/donate